

University of Michigan,  
Detroit Observatory  
(Old University Observatory)  
Observatory and Ann Streets  
Ann Arbor  
Washtenaw County  
Michigan

HABS No. MI-302

HABS  
MICH,  
81-ANAR,  
12A-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS  
MICH,  
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UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN,  
DETROIT OBSERVATORY  
(Old University Observatory)

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Location: Observatory and Ann Streets, Ann Arbor, Washtenaw County, Michigan.

Present Owner: University of Michigan.

Significance: The 1853-54 Detroit Observatory was one of the nation's first astronomical houses. It contains the 12-1/2 inch refracting telescope, which was once the largest refractor in the nation and the third largest astronomical instrument in the world. Its owner, the University of Michigan, was among the nation's first schools of higher education to offer astronomical courses, and once held high academic esteem for its programs and discoveries.

General Information:

The Observatory consists of the original 1853-54 section and later additions. The former contains two-story observatory and one-story east and west wings. The observatory is surmounted by a revolving dome approximately 20 feet in diameter and contains a pier for the 12-1/2 inch refracting telescope. This pier rests on a stone foundation approximately 15 feet below grade. The upper part of the telescope is in the form of a truncated cone. The dome has a steel frame and copper plate covering. The east wing, as it has since construction, houses meridian circle instruments. (Meridian circle is an astronomical method for making exact determinations of time through star sightings). The west wing was used as a library and a director's office.

The exterior of the original section is styled with Italianate and Greek Revival elements. Italianate style brackets support the nearly flat roofs. Small windows are on the cornice of the observatory, between the brackets. All door and window designs are Greek Revival; note their long rectangular openings, narrow doors and window lintels. The main entrance porch has reeded Doric columns and a classical entablature. (See HABS drawings for this). The walls are stucco-over-brick, scored to imitate stone, a common feature of Greek Revival architecture. The foundation is of squared stones.

The additions are the "new" observatory on the south and east sides of the east wing, built in 1908, and the 1868 director's residence adjoining the west wing, now torn down. They all had the same exterior finish as the original section. The "new" observatory is larger than the original observatory, and houses the 37-1/2 inch refracting telescope, which when installed in 1911, made the nation's largest 12-1/2 inch refracting telescope permanently obsolete.

The following is a list of builders and instrument makers for the original section:

Professor Bull, New York	Plans and specifications for the observatory
Pistor and Martins, Berlin, Germany	Meridian circle, in the east wing. (A Mr. Tiede made the astronomical clock)
Henry Fitz, New York	12-1/2 inch refracting telescope (completely American made)
Russell Wheel and Foundry Company of Detroit	Dome construction, except for the fittings and mechanisms

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